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Dubuque

by

Andrew Rich Stevens

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RIVER CITY HISTORY

Losworthy's Lode

First we took the dead out of the trees
where the savages had bundled them,
and put them decently in the ground.
Then we turned to mining.
We worked hard and made a life of it,
widening bluff faults, finding some veins
that the rock choked off after a foot
of teasing us deeper.
Some used the savages' pits to start.
I wasn't squeamish. It just looked like
an unworked mine would pay off sooner.
No real difference, though,
until I broke into that cavern.
For days I'd shipped nothing but sandstone;
I was near deeding that mine to Scratch.
"Leave the earth to the dead."
Then, at one swing, the pick head sank
up to the haft, and I smelled stale air.
I widened the hole, praying, "No gas,"
and stuck my tallow through.
That stone craw just swallowed up the light.

I chipped a crawl, wormed into the vault,
and holding my guttered candle up
and my pick like a cane,
I delved. It seemed strange to be sounding
a tunnel I knew no man had dug.
I'd gone thirty steps through three chambers
when I came on the lode.
I swear that chamber glittered silver.
Glinting cube-crystals of galena
bunched as if the walls and floor sweat gems
that splintered tallow light.

My men work it now, but I'm as tired
as when I picked mineral all day.
I feel darkness swell up from the mines
sometimes after sunset.
Those nights I dream; I never used to.
I'm back underground with my tallow
searching through scree, fumbling each chip
to a pile behind me.
As my hands grow thick and stiff I fear
the gout of candle smoke that coils up,
lead grey, felt thick, will fill the low cave
before I find . . . something.

The End of the Park

Rain spurs the street car horses' broad flanks.

Blinkered eyes widen. The trudge picks up
toward town along the steep-banked creek,
the shy, shallow creek that sidles
down the sandstone pillared valley
where picknickers run to shelters.

Water rubs the trig hillsides raw;
wraith curtains sweep the trees and ravel,
thread the rocks, tearing at the stripped earth,
chafing dirt paths and terraced steps,
wearing around shallow pilings
of the skewed, emptied pavilions.

The grey crowd struggles against the wash
in water-heavy holiday clothes
as the crew-cut slopes melt beneath them.
The rain's hiss washes words from cries;
the creek's roar drowns them, blindly cast
on the sky-deep storm's dark roil.

Spinster

The house is too big for me, like a nutshell
after the meat is dried to a shrivel.
It started when father died and things got quiet.
Meals were the worst. We had the dining room painted
light grey over the wood paneling's whorls
that shifted from light on dark to dark on light
as they never had when father was there for meals.
The house began to grow about that time.
Once, June and I went up to the widow's walk;
she asked me "Doesn't the house seem taller Louise?"
And I would swear it was. I felt quite giddy.
We closed up father's room--that helped a bit.
But letting servants go helped even more,
for rooms would always draw back from the servants
except Miss Grough whose shoes were rubber soled
and didn't jar the house as much, I think.
The house is monstrous now that poor June is gone.
We used to talk for hours of the past
and suck the color from it like sweet syrup
from the cups of penny ice we shared as girls.
And we went to shops in Chicago,
but when the new things came to the house
they never seemed to fit quite into place.
There are still some boxes in June's closet,
teetering on knots I won't undo.

I don't leave my room much now;

the halls are more than I can bear.

Not ghosts, I'm not some frightened child.

Not ghosts, the opposite

that haunt with unrelieved absence.

The Flood

I

Sister Mary Matthew's hands lower slowly to her lap
onto black folds, black beads with glinting links.
She looks into the snow-parched garden
bright beyond the window
where Mary stands, wimpled and shy.
From the back of her bowed head bright lines seep
from a melting cap of snow;
drops fall from her lips and chin
and carve a basin in the drift
that's fallen from her waist.
Sister Mary Matthew's face
lowers to her rising hands
to slide her glasses to her forehead.
Her eyes press dry cool palms for a moment.
Her hands fall away, and she lifts her face
to the blue and white blaze of the garden.

II

Drifts wither in the March blush
eking out the swelling river's rush,
floating trash up the rip-rap:
half-burnt firewood, bubbled plastic
among the jagged, dwindling ice cakes
and the late thaw's ash-fine scourings.
Winter pale, crew-cut men and boys

wrestle sandbags onto dikes against the rise.
When the crest has passed they loaf and smoke
and watch the buildings seem to grow
out of the shuddering brown.
In a sunny week the rank mud
crazes in the streets
and powders under wheels to memory-thin dust
whipped into clouds of dried fish scent by a breeze,
thrashing again among the buildings
and dropping, spent, again.

III

Sister Mary Matthew's hands
lie close to her as faithful dogs
stirring as she says, "Oh, Father,"
settling on the white, starched sheets
as he kisses a narrow scarf
and hangs it round his neck.

The Driver, the Flier, and the New Hand

"Come on, I'll watch and drive, but we need a third.

If something goes wrong I'll shout, you pull this cord

(it trips the tow-rope catch and frees the bird)

then hang on; we'll circle back fast to get him on board."

The highest I've been, almost over the boat.

This high, seems like the rope gives more drag than go;

with a para-wing I'd trip the catch now and float,

"Yah-HOO, ha-ha." They heard that. What? God, "NO."

"Ye was right over us, yelling. He looked too high.

You shouted, I thought . . . I didn't know he'd fall.

It looked . . . Bad . . . wrong. I don't know why.

I was afraid . . . He looked too high is all."

NICK HIRD'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Cat-Man's Tale

The cat-man took me out to see
him hook bleach bottle bouys in,
him drag up lines and haul in traps,
him pile up cats, whisker to fin.
Black backed, the color of love's worst night,
grey bellied they were and smooth as slime,
boot toe headed and shiny eyed
as a Grimm once upon a time.

The cat-man told me where they're from,
how on the bottom lie molds that failed,
that God threw away when he first tried fish
and gave them whiskers instead of scales.

The molds fell into the river, sank,
and filled on their backs in the dark slow flow
with river silt that's stunned to life
when lightning strikes where they're below.

Their bellies are bleached by the bolt and flat
where the mold was open and gave no form.

They love the bottom like all mud does
where they don't know light or air or warmth
until the cat-man's slat trap drops

from the rocking boat where they fall asleep
gaping and dripping their brother mud
dreaming of melting into the deep.

The cat-man took me back to the shore
of broken rock and dust and clay,
where Mother scolded "Where have you been?"
and hoisted me up and hauled me away.

On the River

Where the morning warm sand shaded
into flat, soft dirt beneath the trees
the stink drew in my chin and wrinkled my nose.
Father just showed his teeth in the grin
he'd used when he hooked the wet guts out
of our breakfast--channel cats.
"You learn to love that smell," he said,
and led me through the trees.
He showed me coon prints, tiny shooting stars,
crab spiders waiting like white berries,
and clots of trailing grass and sticks
left on branches by the spring flood.
Then in a stand of scrub willow
he slit his eyes and stopped,
pointing into the oil-still slough.
Even the crossing V's of ripples
where the current swept a half-drowned limb
were settled into still dimples.
I couldn't see it till it budged
and shocked itself into sight, darker grey
across the slough, against the weedy bank.
Stretching its spike beak through them
and came up dangling a jerking frog.
The beak flipped it free and clapped at it,

caught one leg at the knee, flicked again,
but the leg tore free. Snapping it down,
the bird half stepped, speared the twitching frog,
spread long wings and rose,
head bobbing forward with each wing throb,
beak and limp claws trailing drops
that glittered into the green slough.
I turned away to my spell-bound father
who watched it rise, eyes and teeth bright,
skin dark against the glowing leaves.

The Passage

Between the built-up edges of the bluffs,
where the rot-sweet smell of earth
snakes up like vines around dead trunks
to fur the inside of the nose,
a dark circle holds the hillside.
Two boys wide at the perfect lip,
it squeezes where they turn their lights on,
so as they walk their arms and shoulders butt.
Their lights slide--spots upon the wall
that bends upon itself around them
a cornerless slant upward,
until they find a narrow hole
layered with leaves and candy wrappers.
The next drain lets down a dirty glow,
and at a third, papered with faded newsprint,
the tunnel drops around them.
They stoop and shuffle, shoulder on shoulder
but still bump heads and elbows
on the damp of the stretching wall.
Echoes follow after
as they come to the closest passage yet,
where they go single file and on all fours
at first happy not to crouch,
soon crawling dogged, longing for the end.
When they stop to rub their palms and knees

they hear a scratching up the tunnel
and their lights catch a scuttling shape
that turns two red glitters on them.

They scramble up the next hole
and squeeze into the gutter from the sewer
into the smell of exhaust and hot tar.

Communicants' Class

Screens kept the grades apart Sundays
in the low, wide fellowship hall,
as the locked office kept the church
from the opened hall during class.
Those Wednesdays Neuhaus had us first.
Framed by neat hair, his soft face coaxed;
we prayed, ate, gabbed, then went downstairs,
obeyed the organist (Kirkauld,
who glared and threatened) and sang, prayed,
and then went home about twilight.

One night as Kirkauld's stone grip eased,
Neuhaus' slack hand due to take us,
his nasal "Now, boys . . . " to lead us
to final prayer, the minister
entered like a sign, summoned with
"Teach me, O Lord, the way. . . . " He stood,
sparse hair spruce, but eyes ice, waiting,
huge clasped hands like tangled ram's horns.

He didn't have us pray but stand
and come to the robe room. He said,
"This is the way I go Sundays
after I've prayed with the choir."
Below the office's locked door,
from tile and paint to bare concrete,
into the grey and wet dust smell

into the grey and wet dust smell
we stepped, shouldered to single file
every few yards by buttresses
and relics silted in between.

A hoe, scythe, and pitchfork, rusted,
worn from crops long in, leaned useless
in one niche. The Nativity
they used to put out in the snow
was next, Joseph's staff short, crook gone,
blissful Mary cracked, on her back,
and Jesus, face down, back cat-arched
in a buckling plywood manger.
The electric "Merry Christmas"
they still use hung in the last niche.

The stairs, the door to the pulpit,
and what the pastor must have said
didn't stay with me like that trash,
Though my brooding troubled Neuhaus,
Kirkauld liked me better quiet,
so they laid on their heavy hands.
Kirkauld played organ, Neuhaus beamed.
Between them the minister spoke.
But I was alone in my thoughts,
in the tunnel that cleaved the church.

Fish Flies

The minnow lions stalk their prey a year
then, sacrificing jaw for wing are risen
from nymph husks, hunger and the murky water
of the womb-dark backwater sloughs, a clean host
that darkens one day with its life of flight.
Drawn toward the sun on flailing wings all day,
their mark falls as their world turns from the light
for moon and stars can't draw like the night city.
Between the car lot's floodlights and chrome highlights
fishflies arc, coupling, their quiet flutter drowned
by the low drone of artificial day.
They move on the lit billboards' bright parts, dark lace
seething across light words, pale skin, white grins.
Light drunk they gather on bar signs to bask,
then drop to the gutter after the flicker dies.
The writhing clouds around the streetlights thin,
raining ghostly whole sheathes spent of seed
that nudge among the heaps of dead and glisten,
rustle with them in the silent morning's breeze
that wafts their dead fish scent along the street.

The Alarm

(on the lawns and walls of academe)

The first leaves, passed to the wind's keep
from the ebbd, root-bound drive,
clatter down the empty street.
Sparrows start in dust-devil swirls
from pecking the fine grain
of the cut lawn's short seed stalks.
They tumble in a supple weave,
shredding on the hawthorn,
sending tatters to the roof,
then fall back in a voiceless rush,
returning, one by one,
quiet as breath to the grass.

At the dusk in the clambering ivy
a hundred sparrows fight
over the sheltered perches.
The leaves ripple with cheeping birds
that flutter, wheel, and dive
to drive rivals from their spots.
The warfare's din draws yet more birds
to shrill for warm wall space.
A clap or shout will still them;
attackers flee, defenders freeze,
grasping stiffened leaf stems,
in a second's silent awe.

While Walking Home

Dry snow hisses from the fields.

Fence post lee a still boat wake.

Drifts push up--slow waves.

Footprints sink. I am alone.

Cast back thought, a net to the wind.

A bright scrap caught; I remember

I sat in church and watched fat flakes

drift down, wind slanting them

next to the window, left to right.

A few feet out from the church they spun,

tossed by cross winds, borne then dropping.

The rest fell right to left.

Sharp gust bows my head. I squint.

Fence post lee could cup a mouse.

I'm no church mouse, but

how much further do I have.

The Third Street Steps

The concrete steps were bone bright
by streets at bottom and top,
but quickened as we took them,
aroused in light that trembled
through the close trees' limbs and leaves.
Halfway up the light-fleshed steps,
tree-screened from the noisy streets
paths looped and stretched from the steps.
We took the paths for our own
and slid them, climbed them clean.
We pushed up weedy reaches,
met in faults, spat off ledges,
and traded hurts for secrets
(we found abandoned steps' shards
and followed them up the gnarl).

Now my evening climb toward home
never strays from the steep steps,
but a voice, a rustling bush
will jolt me, split me in two:
watching breathless from the trees
and trudging up the grey steps, huffing.